

# 1. Introduction

In late 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) initiated a planning process aimed at evaluating the feasibility of restoring and preserving approximately 21,953-acres of land located directly adjacent to the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge now called the Yellow River Focus Area. The planning process, which was done in association with the Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan, included a thorough review of opportunities and issues related to fish and wildlife resource management by the Service in the area, as well as an assessment of roles the Service might take in achieving its mission, that of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and resource objectives for the Great Lakes-Big Rivers Region. The evaluation of the area was done in response to the declining status of numerous Service trust resources in the Great lakes-Big Rivers Region and interest among diverse stakeholder groups within the local area and the region.

The Yellow River Focus Area spans roughly 18 miles north and south by 2-3 miles east and west (Figure 1). The project represents a unique opportunity for the Service to protect rare and declining bottomland forest and adjacent upland habitat for the benefit of migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, public recreation, and environmental education. Species of federal concern in the area include the eastern massasauga rattlesnake (the area contains one of only four remaining massasauga populations in Wisconsin), Blanding's turtle, cerulean warbler, and Karner blue butterfly. The red-shouldered hawk, acadian flycatcher, yellow-crowned night heron, sedge wren, prothonotary warbler, and Louisiana waterthrush, each of which falls within various state categories of concern, are also found there. Several species exhibiting significant population declines are present during the breeding season, including the veery, wood thrush, and golden-winged warbler. The Refuge has already received a sizable grant to provide private lands technical assistance to landowners in the Yellow River Focus Area. In the past two years, 121 landowners owning 17,308 acres in the Yellow River Focus Area have received some form of technical assistance from the Service in managing their lands for wildlife. Interest in preserving this important natural area is high.

To document the evaluation of potential impacts relative to expanding Service acquisition tools and Refuge programs into the Yellow River Focus Area, an environmental assessment (EA) was prepared by the Service. In addition, an Economic Impact Assessment and Land Protection Plan were also prepared (attached).

Most of the information requested in this feasibility report has been covered in the CCP and associated EA, including the economic impact assessment. Rather than repeat sections of the CCP, EA or economic impact assessment, those documents are referenced where appropriate.

(a) Ownership pattern.

There are an estimated 230 landowners owning roughly 270 tracts of land in the Yellow River Focus Area.

(b) Potential willing/unwilling sellers.

Interest in Service conservation easements is especially high in the Yellow River Focus Area. However, no effort has been made by the Service to determine the exact number of willing sellers, either for easement or fee-simple purchase. Several landowners have approached the Refuge with an interest in selling their land to the Service.

As of September 2000, of the 230 landowners in the Yellow River Focus Area, 121 owning 17,308 acres had signed up with the Service for technical assistance. Of those, 16 landowners owning 1,233 acres have signed Wildlife Management Agreements. Restoration work accomplished to date includes: 3 sedge meadow restorations (62 acres), 3 wetland restorations (33 acres), 1 bottomland hardwood restoration (54 acres) and 6 savanna/prairie restorations (135 acres). All work was performed by Refuge Private Lands personnel.

(c) Government attitude (local and State).

The Wisconsin DNR has identified the entire Yellow River watershed as significantly important for wildlife resources and supports the Service effort to restore and preserve it. The Nature Conservancy also supports the proposal. In addition, local conservation groups have voiced their support for the preservation project. Juneau county personnel have expressed concern over the potential impacts of Service fee-acquisition on local property taxes. Overall, restoration and preservation of the Yellow River Focus Area by the Service enjoys wide support.

(d) Legislative requirements.

None

(e) Relocation plan summary (see the Relocation Handbook for (341 FW 2) for details).

Where it does not create management issues and where the landowner is interested in retaining them, the acquisition of buildings and other structures will be avoided when possible. Many of the dwellings in the Yellow River Focus Area are seasonal homes and would not conflict with proposed restoration and management activities.

(f) Revenue sharing.

See the attached Economic Impact Assessment (Chapter 4) appended to the Refuge CCP for a discussion of Revenue Sharing.

(g) Compliance (legal, political, appraisal, etc.).

All legal compliance requirements set forth by the Service have been met.

## **2. Although the final acquisition estimate for land and improvements is presented as a lump sum, the estimate should be based on the following:**

(a) Direct cost of acquisition based on current estimate.

The actual cost to implement the entire project will vary depending upon the number of landowners who are interested in selling fee title, the number of landowners who are interested only in easements, and the number of landowners who are not interested in participating or who only want technical assistance or a cooperative agreement. Acquisition cost for the entire 21,953-acre area in fee-title would likely range from \$10 to \$12 million. As of 1998, the county assessed value for the area was \$9,008,510

(\$5,046,310 for land and \$3,962,200 for improvements). Acquisition of easements in the 21,953-acre area is difficult to estimate. However, assuming a typical conservation easement would likely comprise roughly 65 percent of fee value, we would estimate the cost to be between \$6.5 to \$7.8 million. The number of landowners interested in easements in the project area is greater than that for outright purchase.

(b) Land appreciation projected over a reasonable period to a proposed date of project initiation.

Presumptions on projections should also be stated.

Land appreciation would likely be included in the estimates given above for acquisition costs considering that it is unlikely in the foreseeable future that the entire area will be purchased by the Service, either in fee or easement purchase.

(c) Indirect costs of acquisition (appraisals, negotiations, title evidence, surveys, closing, relocation, etc.) may entail a certain amount of projection.

Indirect cost are estimated at 15% - 25% of acquisition costs.

**3. The report must identify any significant area of land to be added in excess of biological and/or engineering requirements solely to facilitate acquisition; e.g., the inclusion of uneconomic remnants and remainders to avoid large severance damages. The report must also identify any additional land that must be acquired or protected in order to establish the unit, such as the remainder of a drainage or irrigation district. Cost estimates, both with and without this additional land, must be clearly stated so that the significance of these actions is readily apparent to the decision makers.**

No lands are currently included in the proposal that are in excess to the biological requirements of the project.

**4. Other Information. During the study, additional data, other than real estate values, should be obtained. The size and nature of a project will generally dictate what additional facts are needed to get an overall picture of the proposed project and surrounding area and the impact the project could have on the locality. Some of these data are:**

- (a) The general financial situation of the county or counties where the project is located. This should include the county tax or mill rate schedule showing the proposed distribution of taxes to the State, county, school districts, roads, and other purposes.  
See the attached Economic Impact Assessment (Chapter 4) appended to the Refuge CCP for a discussion of land values and property taxes.
- (b) Information on the effect the project will have on drainage and irrigation districts partly or wholly within the proposed project.  
It is Service policy not to impede the flow of waters from other lands, even if that flow passes through lands acquired by the Service. The Service would not cause any artificial increase of natural water levels, width, or flow of waters without ensuring that impacts would be limited to those lands in which the Service acquires an appropriate management interest. Additional studies and detailed planning would be performed prior to the Service undertaking any management activity affecting drainage. If the Service does inadvertently create a water-related problem for any private landowner (flooding, soil saturation, increase in water table height, etc.), the problem would be corrected by the Service at the Service's expense. The Refuge would continue to maintain ditches and water control structures that influence water access and use downstream.
- (c) Other impacts of the project on the local area that should be identified may include the impact on an individual, on adjacent landowners, or on the local community at large.  
See the attached Economic Impact Assessment for a discussion of potential costs and benefits associated with this project.
- (d) General information on the relocation aspects of the project under P.L. 91-646; i.e., approximate number of people; type of occupancy, businesses, farms, and ranches to be displaced; and the adequacy of the locality to absorb the displaced persons.  
See the attached Economic Impact Assessment and Land Protection Plan
- (e) Any possible acquisition problems uncovered during the feasibility study should be discussed, as well as any other matters that might have a bearing on the proposed project or would be helpful in considering the proposal.  
None

(f) Include project map and color pictures.  
Attached

(g) The report format should be varied to meet the complexities and nature of the particular project being studied.

- 5. A land acquisition strategy shall be developed for the alternative being recommended and shall outline, in the order of acquisition priority, such factors as resource protection, public and administrative uses, changing land values and uses, and willingness of owners to sell. The land acquisition strategy should also address any proposed schedule for the transfer of property under the jurisdiction of other Government agencies. For projects that will have a complex and drawn out land acquisition program, the general strategy developed at this stage should be updated and expanded, after project inception, into a land acquisition plan.**

See the Land Protection Plan, appended to the EA

Prepared by:

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